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ABSTRACT

This instructional resource for classroom teachers and teacher educators who are actively involved in the development and enhancement of mentoring relationships between classroom professionals describes a mentoring relationship between an experienced teacher and a first-year teacher in middle school language arts. The resource outlines lessons learned in: (1) planning the learning experiences in mentoring; (2) letting the mentoring relationship evolve; and (3) "putting yourself out there" as a teacher and learner. Contains seven references. (RS)

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Teacher as Mentor, Teacher as Learner:

Mentoring a First-Year Teacher in Middle School Language Arts

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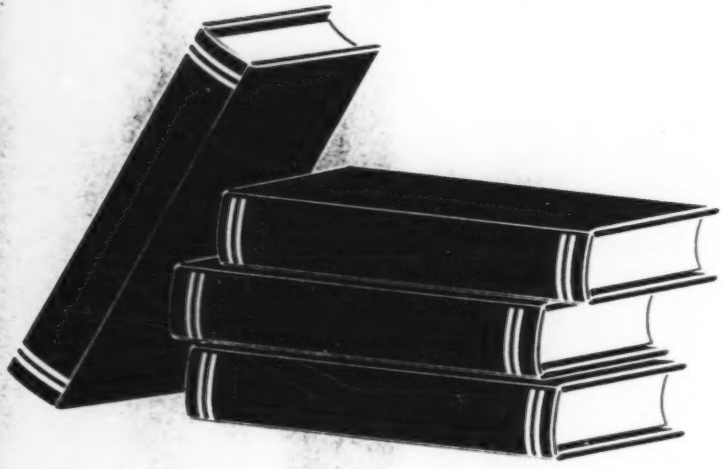

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This brochure is for classroom teachers and teacher educators who are actively involved in the development and enhancement of mentoring relationships between classroom professionals. In our case, the mentoring relationship under study was between Dera, an experienced teacher, and Tara, a first-year teacher in middle school language arts. Randi, a university teacher educator, provided a valued "outsider" perspective as Dera and Tara developed their working relationship and reflected on the issues of teaching and learning that such a relationship creates. During our year together, the three of us focused primarily on the classroom teacher's perspective on mentoring; in particular, we were interested in documenting Dera's experience of helping induct a novice into the teaching profession.

In addition to teaching in the middle-school language arts classroom full-time, Dera maintains an active research agenda. Since receiving her doctorate in Reading Education, she has published in the areas of classroom discussion, writing, and teacher education (i.e., Alvermann, et al., in press; Weaver, 1992; Weaver & Stanulis, 1996). In contrast to Dera's years of experience as a language arts professional, Tara was newly graduated from a prestigious eastern liberal arts college. Although she had taken many education courses in college, Tara's degree was in English.

Dera and Randi had worked together previously to design a collaborative model of student teaching (Weaver & Stanulis, 1996) while mentoring an undergraduate student teacher. With Tara, Dera was faced with a new kind of mentoring task, one that extended through an entire school year and involved working with a novice teacher who was also a fellow teaching professional. Tara and Dera were provided by their school system 1 hr release time each week for formal work, but their relationship quite naturally evolved into more informal ways of communicating as well.

Mentoring

There were several reasons for our study of Dera's mentoring relationship with Tara. Although much has been written about mentor/novice relationships, there is little research about what thoughtful mentors do, what mentors learn about themselves as teachers and learners, and what mentors and mentees learn from each other (Abell, Dillon, Hopkins, McInerney & O'Brien, 1995; Feiman-Nemser, 1992; Stanulis, 1994). We reasoned that classroom teachers and teacher educators could benefit from learning about one mentor teacher's experience.

We also agreed that the reality of a novice's involvement in both teaching and learning to teach is often ignored in the school culture (Wildman, Niles, Magliaro, & McLaughlin, 1989). We were eager to examine a formal mentoring relationship that took place during the real time of a school year, was respected and valued in the school culture, and offered both benefits and responsibilities to both teachers. In the paragraphs that follow, we offer Dera's perspective: what an experienced teacher, who also carries a full load of middle-school language arts teaching responsibilities, learned from a yearlong mentoring relationship with a less experienced peer. Specifically, this brochure will outline the lessons we learned in:

1. Planning the learning experiences in mentoring;
2. Letting the mentoring relationship evolve; and
3. "Putting yourself out there" as a teacher and learner.

Lesson One: Plan the Learning Experiences in Mentoring

For teachers working together in a mentoring relationship, planning is key, and realistic goals should be agreed upon at the outset. Even with the luxury of weekly release time, Dera and Tara found that their work together often had to take a back seat to the daily mechanics of school life; for example, Tara's room had to be set up during pre-planning for the seventh-grade language arts students, committee responsibilities for both teachers demanded afternoon time, and Tara was serving as the middle-school coach for girls' basketball and soccer. Several of the tools for working together that the two teachers had planned on proved to be too costly in terms of time.

> As Dera recalls, "Tara and I had planned to keep a dialogue journal twice a week: One entry for exploring general issues of teaching and learning, and one entry for just talking about Tara's particular concerns. But as language arts teachers, both of us were also responding to student reading journals, plus being involved in a journal shared by all the language arts teachers: It was just too much 'journaling'. We kept up with our journal for about a month, but then it just became easier to see each other at lunch or meet for dinner before an evening meeting. The journal, which I still think is a good idea, seemed to become sort of artificial and we dropped it."

> Tara says, "Part of me wishes we had continued doing it, because I really liked having it there to write about right when something occurred. I guess I could have kept my own journal and just written things down; I probably should have kept a notebook and just jotted things down when they came to mind, but that's in an idealistic setting."

Both parties in a mentoring relationship should be realistic at the outset about the amount of time that different means of communication entail. Such realistic expectations avoid feelings of failure or disappointment. Dera wishes that she had been more explicit early in the year about scheduling mutual classroom visits:

> "I just sort of thought that it would happen, that we would take out our planning books and decide on times for visits as the year progressed, but we really had difficulty in putting this together. I really wanted Tara to be an observer in my class, to see me fail at my well-laid lesson plans, to learn that even experience doesn't shield a teacher from problems. But it just never happened: she was always happy to have me in her class, but I think I just didn't make it explicit enough at the beginning of the year that she should be in my class, too. By the time the routines of the year really got going and we didn't have this built in, it was harder for me to insist that Tara make time for being an observer as well as a practitioner."

As she reflected on the experience at the close of the school year, Dera recognized the importance of planning clear goals and learning experiences for mentoring, being explicit about expectations, and being realistic about the constraints that naturally exist because of other responsibilities in the teaching day.

Lesson Two: Let the Relationship Evolve

A mentoring process can begin quite naturally as a sort of parent-child relationship, but there are other roles that are worthy of exploration. At the beginning of their relationship, Dera saw herself as "taking care of" Tara, helping her to feel comfortable in a new locale, negotiating the culture of a new school, and introducing her to the philosophy of the middle-school language arts program.

Dera discovered that though their relationship seemed to follow a natural progression, there were dangers involved in this "mentor as mother" role:

> "Sometimes I felt I needed to speak very strongly to Tara about one issue or another. If she had been a student teacher, I could have been much more explicit; but as it was, I felt uncomfortable offering her advice that I wouldn't have offered to another colleague. When I do this again, we'll discuss this aspect of the relationship more clearly in the beginning and decide together what should be done when there are tough things to be said."

We understand that personal style is influential in the way a mentor builds bridges of communication with her mentee; for example, Dera describes herself as a person who tends to avoid conflict, and this tendency was obvious in her work with Tara. Mentors would do well to understand their own approaches to controversy and conflict before beginning a mentoring relationship.

As the relationship evolved across the school year, one of Dera's pleasures in mentoring Tara was seeing how fluid the borders between their roles of advisor/advisee became:

> "Because we were having all these conversations about Tara's practice, it became natural for me to share questions about my own teaching. At first I was worried that she'd see this as a burden—I'm supposed to be the expert, right?—but I think Tara was pleased to toss around ideas with me about how I might go about solving various problems. It made us closer, and I think it deepened our respect for each other as teachers."

The relationship seemed to evolve as Tara's immediate concerns changed: As a first-year teacher fresh from college preparation as an English major, she needed support in acclimating to a new environment, thinking about teaching middle-school language arts rather than college literature, and learning to teach in a school where a strong writing workshop model was fostered. Tara, Dera, and Randi talked during the year about the shifting roles that the relationship provided. We believe that the mentor of a novice teacher, aware of the difficulties of mentoring in a collegial relationship, can balance successfully the responsibilities of providing emotional and intellectual support mentoring.

Lesson Three: "Put yourself out there"

Throughout the year, Dera grew more comfortable with revealing her own vulnerabilities in order to help Tara.

> "I think anytime you interact with another teacher you become more conscious of what you do yourself, and I've done that. Periodically I've thought, now what would Tara see if she were in my classroom today? . . . I've realized that I did not mind her seeing me fail, it did not bother me. Those days when you feel like you're tap dancing as hard as you can and you're not getting anything, I realize that I would not have minded her seeing that."

And yet, Dera recognized another side of this willingness to, as she said, "put myself out there": What if the mentor gets nothing back? For Tara and Dera, this situation was manifested in the issue of classroom relationships between teacher and student:

> "I realized there's a difference between who I am as a person and who I am as a teacher, and for Tara I don't think there is that difference. For example, she let the kids call her by her first name during soccer practice, and now they do it on the bus, of course, and I'm sure they're doing it in class. For her, there's not that line that I think is very important with middle-school children. . . . I have so much respect for what she puts into her teaching, but there's a lot to the *art* of teaching that's not based on good lesson plans. I think that's an area in which we could have had some good conversations, but it just wasn't of interest to her, so after awhile I just let it drop."

Dera was disappointed in this area of her work with Tara. She sometimes felt that issues of great importance to her as a teacher were of little value to Tara, and she was frustrated by the necessity for "just backing off after awhile. . . . When you really do care about something, you don't always want to talk about it with someone who doesn't care about it as you do, because it can make it seem trivial to you, like some of these classroom interactions that interest me so much." Mentor teachers are not supervisors, after all, and the development of teaching style is a personal process that is not always amenable to the constraints of a mentoring relationship between colleagues. Dera learned to recognize what she could and could not achieve.

Evaluating the Process

"Mostly what I felt during the year," says Dera, "was frustration or guilt because I wasn't doing more!" As she looked back on her year's association with Tara, Dera wondered if she'd done as much for Tara as Tara had done for her. Dera remarked that this experience had heightened her awareness of her role as a teacher:

> "I think I'm so much more tuned to the complexity of a teacher's role in a middle-school classroom. Tara's teaching style will evolve into something very different from my own, I think, and this process has forced me to look at my own practice and ask myself why I do the things I do."

She admitted that the year had been demanding, but was convinced that her learning and Tara's had made the project worthwhile. Specifically, Dera learned that:

- It is important to plan realistic and potentially educative experiences together at the beginning of the year. One experience that is critical is observation in both the mentor and novice's classrooms.
- It is necessary to be patient as the mentoring relationship evolves from one that primarily relies on emotional support to one that can stimulate intellectual growth.
- It is helpful to feel like you can "put yourself out there" and reveal your own vulnerabilities in ways that can help a novice learn about the realities of teaching.

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